The book cover features a background of intricate lace patterns. The top half is a solid dark brown color, while the bottom half shows a detailed, light-colored lace design. The text is centered and uses a clean, sans-serif font.

STEEVE O. BUCKRIDGE

AFRICAN  
LACE-BARK  
IN THE  
CARIBBEAN

The Construction of Race,  
Class and Gender

B L O O M S B U R Y

The Tainos were among the earliest people of the Caribbean to use bark-cloth and lace-bark in their daily activities. The seventeenth-century natural historian and physician Sir Hans Sloane reported while in Jamaica that the Indians "peel the cassava with shells and [were] putting it into bags made from tree bark, pressing it and putting it over fire."<sup>128</sup> The bags, which were used as sieves in preparing meals, were more than likely made from lace-bark—a custom to be adopted later by enslaved Africans in Jamaica. The use of lace-bark in food preparation reveals how functional and important this form of bark-cloth was in women's lives. Lace-bark was undeniably essential to women's work in preparing meals for themselves and their family. Likewise, the eighteenth-century local historian Edward Long revealed that "the Indians employ it [lace-bark] in a variety of different fabrics."<sup>129</sup> Long does not elaborate on how lace-bark was "incorporated" into other fabrics, nor does he explain what styles were fashioned out of these "varieties of fabrics," but the evidence confirms that some indigenous people were well aware of the lace-bark tree and used its fibers to their benefit.

One of the most interesting examples of the Tainos' use of lace-bark comes from the island of Hispaniola. In the nineteenth century, a few Europeans ventured into the interiors of Hispaniola to visit one of the few remaining Taino villages not destroyed or displaced by colonial settlers. The Taino retreat was hidden deep in the rainforests of the interior. During their visit and a walkabout with the *cacique*, the visitors noticed a flutter of butterflies and enquired of the *cacique* if they could catch some. After searching through the woods for a few minutes, the *cacique's* "quick and trained eye soon detected a young *Lagetta* tree, the bark of which he cut then by a longitudinal slit and with the help of his knife-point, he took off the cylinder of bark."<sup>130</sup> The *cacique* "readily separated a thin stratum which when pulled open, presented a loose fibrous texture, hardly to be distinguishable from manufactured lace."<sup>131</sup> He then took a bamboo shoot, which he stripped and shaped into a circle, and attached the lace with string-like fibers from a palm leaf, hence creating as good a "butterfly net as could be desired . . . and soon half-a-dozen of the splendid butterflies were seen and admired at leisure."<sup>132</sup> The visitors were not only amazed and delighted, but it was obvious that the *cacique* had done this before, especially since the entire process took about a quarter of an hour.<sup>133</sup>

## 2 PLANTATION JAMAICA: “CONTROLLING THE SILVER”

*Having had from my youth a strong inclination to the study of plants and all other productions of nature; and having through the course of many years with great labour gathered whatever could be procured . . . being fully convinced that nothing tends more to raise our ideas of the power, wisdom, goodness, providence, and other perfections of the Deity.<sup>1</sup>*

—SIR HANS SLOANE, 1749

### Natural history and Jamaican lace-bark

In 1687, the European physician Hans Sloane arrived in Jamaica as the personal physician to the new governor of Jamaica, the Second Duke of Albemarle. During his fifteen months of residence on the island, Sloane studied his new surroundings and soon developed an obsession for collecting natural and artificial objects, which dominated the remainder of his life. Sloane was one of the first European scientists to travel to Jamaica, and the Caribbean plant and animal specimens he collected were described in careful detail and lavishly illustrated in his two-volume magnum opus, *Voyage to the Islands Madero, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers, and Jamaica, with the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees, Four-footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, etc. of the last of those Islands* (1707–1725).<sup>2</sup> Sloane's natural history of the Caribbean captivated the British public and established him as a literary genius of his day.<sup>3</sup> Hans Sloane's visit to Jamaica coincided with the onset of the Sugar Revolution, when the local plantocracy had rushed to transform the economy and labor organizations into massive agro-industrial operations for overseas markets. It was also a time when



economic-botany was taking shape, and several European bio-prospectors scoured the Caribbean region in search of food, medicine, dyes, raw materials, and luxury goods. Transatlantic explorations were primarily European male enterprises, and among those who came were men of science, including naturalists, physicians, and botanists. Artists and collectors of curiosities also traveled to the region. The published works of Sloane and other natural historians of the period circulated widely in Europe among scientists,<sup>4</sup> and by the eighteenth century, interest in the natural history of the Caribbean had become so popular among the upper classes in Britain that the Caribbean became an important zone of nature enquiry and colonial bio-prospecting.<sup>5</sup>

During the early period of cross-cultural contact between Europeans and Amerindians, the conquistadors sought wealth in the form of gold and silver but, by the eighteenth century, bio-prospectors who arrived were seeking bio-resources or "green gold" that would yield vast fortunes. Some bio-prospectors sought to make Europe pharmaceutically efficient and at the same time assist the colonial power in controlling the colonies by learning how to combat tropical disease.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, European bio-prospectors turned to the Amerindians whom they once considered as "savages" for useful medicines. This is no different from today where pharmaceutical and drug companies are engaged in genetic and medical research amongst indigenous people that lead to new drugs. In the eighteenth century, as the Amerindian population declined, the medicine of African slaves in the West Indies became very important to bio-prospectors. Countless Africans were new to the island as they arrived as slaves, but they were familiar with tropical diseases and knew how to cure them. Still, many enslaved Africans were not always willing to share their medicinal secrets with European physicians.<sup>7</sup>

The rise of bio-prospecting within the region was an important phenomenon that greatly impacted the metropolitan's view of the colonial world and its inhabitants. Sloane, like many of his contemporaries, was interested in bio-resources and prepared for his bio-prospecting expedition to the Caribbean. Before leaving for Jamaica, he collected all the data available in Europe on tropical plants so that he could recognize them. Upon arriving in Jamaica, he turned to local residents for information about the natural products of the island, which he later recorded and published.<sup>8</sup> Sloane's natural history books included colorful works of art and detailed narratives of the flora and fauna of the colonies; these depictions captivated the imagination of the readers back in Europe. Natural history publications served several important functions. On one level, they enhanced Europeans' knowledge of the Caribbean; they also illuminated the hidden treasures, wonders, and fascinating objects of the Caribbean's natural world and fostered an awareness of commercial enterprises one could pursue for profit, such as lace-bark.

Samples of specimens and knowledge of how indigenous people and Africans used local plants in Caribbean medicine were introduced in Europe to help save

European lives and provide better healthcare for British Imperialists who sought to control these valuable plants and the medicines derived from them.<sup>9</sup> Even so, natural history publications were important in documenting the flora and fauna of the Caribbean, while collected specimens, seeds, and saplings provided an opportunity to help conserve these plants that were threatened by ecological challenges of the period. Historian David Watts has asserted that the rise of a sugar industry in the Caribbean changed the physical landscape and nature of the environment, which led to deforestation, soil erosion, run off from sugar mills, and the invasion of pests that resulted in the extinction of some species. These changes in the environment were directly related to the social and economic transformations brought by colonial tropical plantations.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, not everyone celebrated the works of the natural historians and bio-prospectors (or bio-piracy). The debate has divided scholars in the field. Michel Foucault believed that natural history in the eighteenth century represented "the eradication of history, fable, hearsay, anatomy, smell, and touch from a field of knowledge restricted to surface visibility, and a language shorn of memory."<sup>11</sup> Basically, it was a time of "pure tabulation of things," while feminist historian of science Carolyn Merchant has argued that this was the period of the "Death of Nature" when nature was detached and distanced from God, who authorized the human exploitation of the environment.<sup>12</sup> Merchant and others felt that the collectors of curiosities seemed more interested in the process of "thingification,"<sup>13</sup> in general, harvesting natural resources and imposing European names, claiming land, and displacing and enslaving indigenous people.<sup>14</sup> What Europeans considered as improvement to the colonial environment was blatant appropriation and exploitation of subjugated people. Underlying these differences, natural history participated in the production of meaning and, therefore, is undeniably crucial to our understanding of the colonial environment.

Natural historians, artists, and collectors of curiosities who sought to study Caribbean plants and animals in their natural environment included observation and scientific research as methods of analysis. Published information about local flora and fauna became historical representations that shaped the colonizers' view of their colonial possessions and simultaneously provided the British public with a window into the natural world of distant colonies and their subjects. Artists throughout the period and beyond also played a significant role in providing a window into the life and natural environment of colonized people and their domains. A fine example is the sketches and paintings by Scottish academician Joseph Bartholomew Kidd (1808-1889).<sup>15</sup> Kidd's painting, *The Date Tree* (see Figure 2.1), beautifully illustrates some sense of the diverse flora of the island of Jamaica, yet there is no semblance or point of reference in the work to the harsh environment created by British merchants and plantocrats who sought to expropriate and enslave Africans for the sole purpose of generating profits based on sugar.

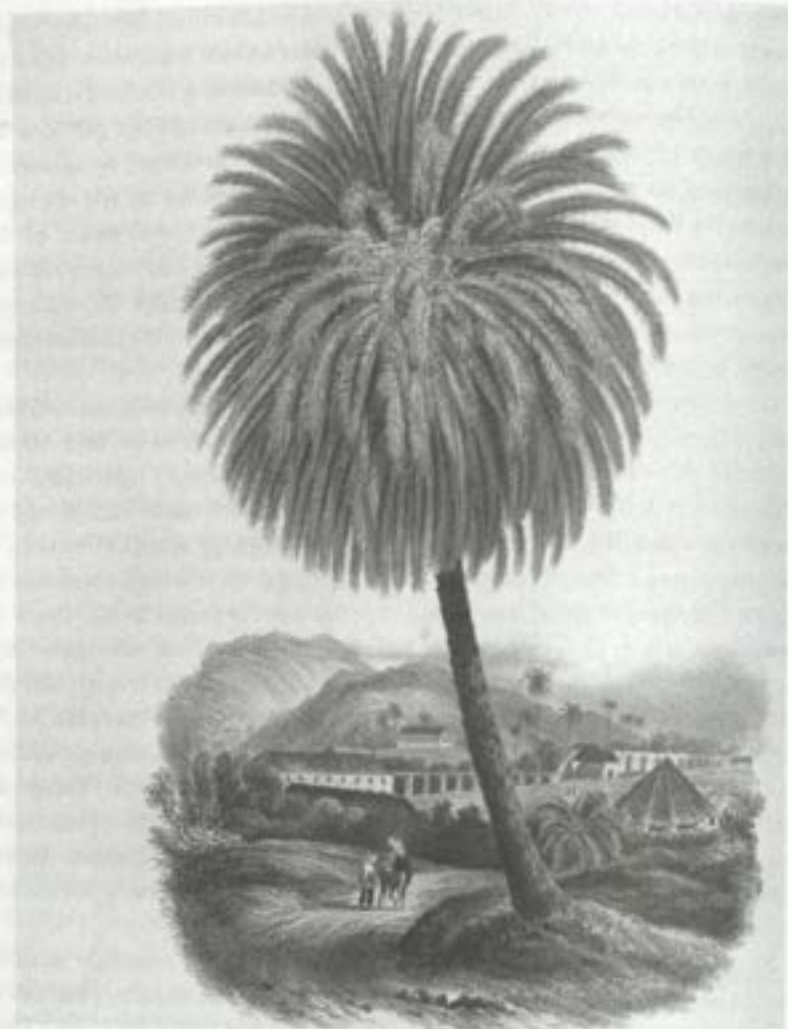


FIGURE 2.1 "Plate 6. The Date Tree/Sugar Works in the Distance" from *Illustrations of Jamaica in a Series of Views Comprising the Principal Towns' Harbours and Scenery*, London & Kingston, 1840, hand-colored lithograph. Joseph Bartholomew Kidd (1808-1889). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Paintings from artists like Kidd are invaluable to understanding the past as well as the tensions and contradictions of "colonialist doctrines and practices ... more or less successfully, on an aesthetic level."<sup>16</sup> Kidd's botanical illustration is an extension of Linnaean botany, part of scientific imperialism that sought to exert some control over the earth's natural resources. Yet, perhaps most perplexing is an attempt on the artists' part to present British imperial landscapes of the island colonies as aesthetically pleasing and morally satisfying.<sup>17</sup> Caribbean landscape



scenes like those of Kidd played essential roles in helping us to understand the impact of colonialism on native people and the colonial spaces beyond the metropolises in Europe. Art historian Christopher Iannini argues that natural historians of the Caribbean in this period "developed a rich repertoire of linguistic and pictorial techniques for cultivating a vivid understanding of the region."<sup>18</sup> Preeminent among them were Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) and Mark Catesby (1683–1749).

Sloane became one of the most influential cultural and scientific figures of the period, and the items he brought back from his voyage to Jamaica formed the basis of a vast collection, which, after his death in 1753, became the foundation of the British Museum, and later the British Library and the Natural History Museum in London.<sup>19</sup> Commenting on his activities in Jamaica and how he was able to amass a large collection, Sloane wrote in 1707, "I took what pains I could at leisure-hours from the business of my profession, to search the several places I could think afforded natural production and immediately described them in a journal. . . . When I return'd into England, I brought with me about 800 plants. . . . And shew'd them very freely to all lovers of such curiosities."<sup>20</sup> Among Sloane's prized collection of Jamaican objects he took with him back to England and "shew'd them very freely" were specimens and illustrations of Jamaican lace-bark.

Lace-bark was known to inhabitants across Jamaica and a few Caribbean territories, but relatively unknown in Britain. Sloane's European audiences were mesmerized by the beauty, uniqueness, and refinement of lace-bark, and soon the plant became known in Britain as the "wonder tree of Jamaica."<sup>21</sup> While Sloane's achievements have been widely celebrated within the medical and scientific communities, it is imperative not to forget the contributions of the indigenous people, and enslaved Africans whose knowledge of herbalism, food, and medicine enriched Sloane's repertoire and pharmacopeia of Jamaican plants and curiosities. The collectibles, plant specimens, and medicinal herbs acquired in Jamaica secured Sloane's fame in the halls of British science and endeared him to the British public at large.

Sloane did not "discover" lace-bark, but received a specimen of the plant from European resident Mr. Leming, who sent it to him "from Luidas [Lluidas Vale], an inland, mountainous plantation, where the tree grew in great plenty."<sup>22</sup> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the lace-bark tree prospered and was abundant in Jamaica. In 1774 Edward Long affirmed that the tree was "common in the woods" of Jamaica.<sup>23</sup> However, Sloane was credited as the person who introduced lace-bark to "civilized Europe."<sup>24</sup> Sloane did not see the tree in its environment, nor did he see the flowers or the seeds. Perhaps time constraints prevented him from venturing into the tree's habitat since he was in Jamaica for a short period. It was not until 1777 that botanists became aware of the tree when European physician, William Wright, brought a complete specimen of the plant from Jamaica and settled on it as a plant species of *Daphne*.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that most Europeans had never heard of lace-bark during this early period is not surprising. Only a few Europeans resided in Jamaica year round as many plantation owners were absentee landlords who lived in Europe off the profits of their estates. The few who remained in Jamaica distanced themselves socially from slaves to maintain their status. Europeans were more concerned with exploiting their slaves for maximum profit rather than paying close attention to what their slaves wore. Others may have confused lace-bark with handmade lace or gauze and would not have been aware unless they were curious to enquire. Lace-bark was difficult to distinguish from handmade lace. Sloane explained, "Unless one knows them [lace-bark] well and look attentively he will not perceive the difference."<sup>26</sup> Sloane was entranced by Jamaican lace-bark to the point where he sought to promote knowledge of the tree not only in print, and lectures, but also in art.

The famous portrait of Sir Hans Sloane painted in 1736 by the artist Steven Slaughter (1697-1765) (Figure 2.2) depicts the naturalist seated upright and dressed in fashionable attire of the period. He is wearing a velvet coat and lace cravat, which at first thought might be lace-bark but, on closer examination, is not. Sloane strikes a regal pose befitting his rank and influence in London society. In the painting, the image is framed by the festooned cloth hanging behind the subject, thus creating a gratuitous, decorative drapery, yet evoking a sense of royalty. The drapery alludes to the "Cloth of Honor" that was popular in portraits of influential people from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Sloane's elaborate wig with curls is nicely coiffed and draped over his shoulders, and his family crest looms in the background. Of particular significance, Sloane is depicted unrolling a scroll to reveal an instructive sketch of Jamaican lace-bark. The prominence of the sketch in the artwork not only speaks volumes but piques the viewer's curiosity and captivates the observer.

Of the 800 plant specimens Sloane took with him to England from Jamaica, he chose Jamaican lace-bark to be part of his official portrait. Sloane does not explain why, but we can assume that he greatly admired this Jamaican tree and chose to singularize and elevate it above all the other plant specimens in his collection. Indeed, Sloane's collection of plants like the Jamaican lace-bark cannot be viewed entirely as a leisurely activity in the curious. Plants in Jamaica were not mere items for curiosity or collection, but essential commodities in people's lives, both as items of utility and resources of profit.<sup>28</sup> Sloane does not discuss enslaved women's association with lace-bark in his treaties, even though women have been engaged with lace-bark for decades prior to Sloane's arrival in Jamaica. Perhaps this lapse on Sloane's part was a reflection of the colonialist mentality. Albert Memmi argues that this is one of the great travesties of colonialism, "the most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and the community."<sup>29</sup> From this perspective, the most dehumanizing aspect of colonialism is not being recognized. The subjugated became merely objects of history and not active participants. Then



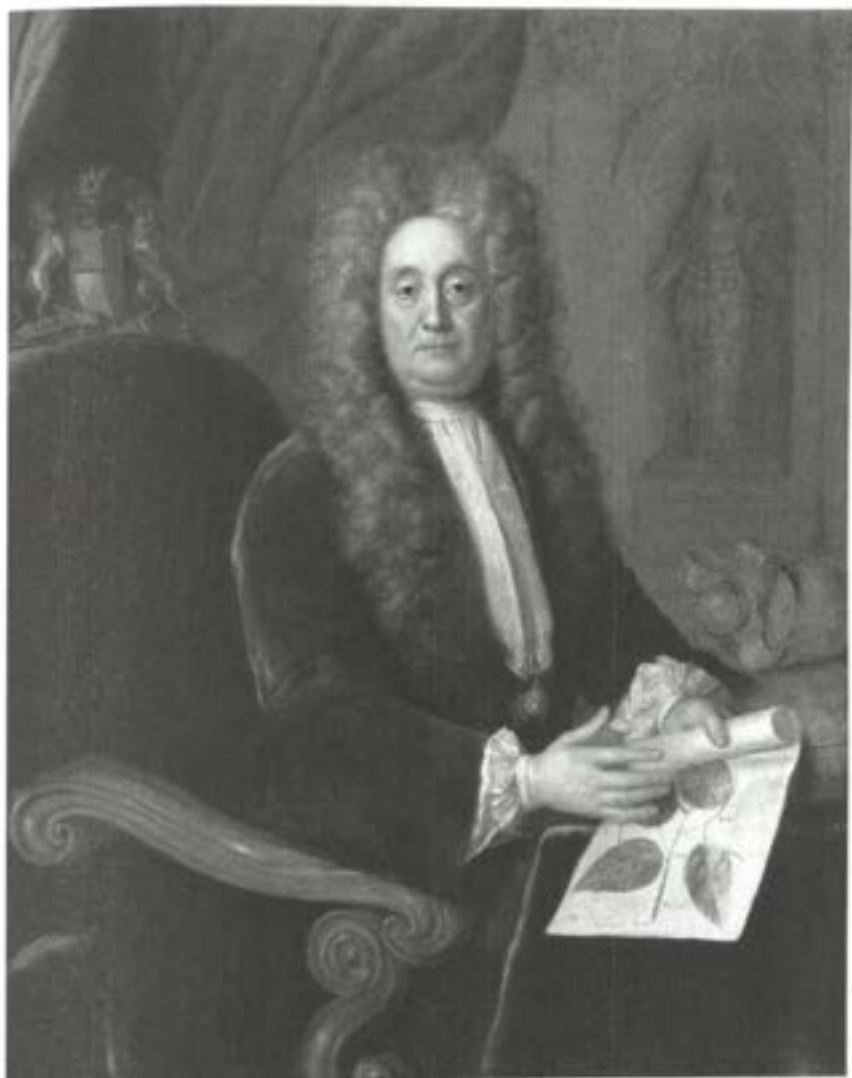


FIGURE 2.2 Sir Hans Sloane. Steven Slaughter (1697–1765). © National Portrait Gallery, London.

again, maybe one should not be too harsh on Sloane; after all, it can be argued he was a product of his time and his collection of curiosities was a response to a higher call, a divine one, and therefore such details might not have been viewed as significant. Historian James Robertson has pointed out that Sloane's presence in Jamaica was too short, a mere fifteen months, hence gaps in his knowledge may have been created.<sup>30</sup> Beyond this, Sloane was clearly fascinated with Jamaican lace-bark. In 1725, he explained why:

What is most strange ... is that the inward bark is made up of about twelve coats, layers, or tunics, appearing white and solid, which if cut off for some length, clear'd of its outward cuticula, or bark, and extended by the fingers, the filaments or threads thereof leaving some rhomboidal interstices, greater or smaller according to the dimensions you extend it to, form a web not unlike gauze, lace, or thin muslin.<sup>33</sup>

Up to that point in time, no one could imagine anything such as "natural lace." Botanists were both puzzled by its beauty and texture, while natural historians of the period, such as Patrick Browne, were "equally at a loss with respect to it."<sup>34</sup> (Figures 2.3, 2.4) Like Sloane, one cannot help but admire the delicacy and intricate network of the lace-bark fibers, yet one is left in awe of nature's uncanny ability to seemingly imitate art.

It is easy to see why Sloane was intrigued, but one does wonder if there may have been commercial interest on his part. Sloane took many Jamaican plant specimens with him back to England and spent six years observing, describing, and comparing his Jamaican samples with existing literature before publishing *Catalogue Plantarum* in 1696.<sup>35</sup> Sloane published recipes for ointments and ingredients for treating eyes, among other ailments.<sup>34</sup> However, Sloane does not say whether he saw lace-bark as a potential business opportunity; we can only surmise, considering that during the period some natural historians and collectors of curiosities were bio-prospecting for commodities and lucrative business ventures. In the eighteenth century, several Europeans saw lace-bark as possible



FIGURE 2.3 *Lagetta lagetta*. Field Museum of Natural History © Field Museum.





FIGURE 2.4 *Lagetta lagetto*. Field Museum of Natural History © Field Museum.

raw material for exploitation. Edward Long suggested, "It may, perhaps, be of service to Great Britain as a manufacturing nation."<sup>35</sup> Colonial commercial interests during this early period may have been deterred due to the tree's inaccessibility and the challenges in propagating the plant on a large scale. At any rate, the idea of a natural substitution for handmade lace would have caught the attention of entrepreneurs who sought to capitalize on lace-bark. One can only imagine lace makers across Europe in a state of fright at the thought of losing their jobs, or their services becoming obsolete, due to lace "growing" on trees! Regardless, since most enslaved Africans and colonized people did not have access to European lace, the opportunity to own a piece of natural lace was most appealing.

## The history of handmade lace

*It is the one costly wear which never vulgarises . . . lace in its comparatively quiet richness never obtrudes itself and is recognized in its true worth and beauty only by those whose superior taste has trained them to see its value.*<sup>36</sup>

F. NEVILL JACKSON

Throughout much of its history, lacemaking was considered a high artistic skill that has charmed men and women for centuries with its beauty and intricate designs. Handmade lace, with its exquisite ornamental openwork spaces of thread, has served many purposes, including as decorative art, a source of wealth, trade commodity, covering for sacred spaces and objects, and adorning and accessorizing the body and dress. Perhaps no other fabric is as transformative of the human body as lace. For instance, lace can both feminize and embolden the body; while for others it is the epitome of gracefulness, gentility, and refinement.<sup>37</sup> As clothing, it has served as a signifier of luxury, extravagance, and elitism.

It is not clear where or when the first handmade lace developed. Cut linen, also a form of early lace, has been unearthed at ancient funerary sites in Egypt and elaborate netting of gold and cotton has been found in mummy wrappings, dating back ten centuries before the Christian era. The knotting of gold, silver, and colored threads and fibers for beauty, even in the most primitive form, were the first attempts at lacemaking.<sup>38</sup> The next step in the evolution of lace included the drawing of threads, followed by "cutwork" involving removing portions or small sections of material and filling the open spaces with stitchery.<sup>39</sup> As discussed earlier, such threads were looped, plaited, or twisted together in one of several ways: with a needle, known as needlepoint lace; with a bobbin, hence bobbin lace, sometimes inaccurately called pillow lace; or by machinery, producing imitations of both needlepoint lace and bobbin lace.<sup>40</sup> An exquisite artifact of bobbin lace can be seen in the handkerchief from the Convent of Notre Dame de Visitation (Figure 2.5).

The Greeks, as far as we know, are believed to have produced the earliest needle-made lace, called reticella, which was entirely geometrical in design with an openwork ground or an open bit of lace that was used to fill in between other usually denser patterns or designs. These simple grounds were called "nets" while bobbin grounds became known as *réseau* (French for "network").<sup>41</sup> Handmade lace, as we know it today, originated in Italy in the fifteenth century, and the cities of Venice, Milan, and Genoa all gave their names to unique and distinctive creations of lace. The Venetians became world-renowned for one of the most beautiful laces, called Venetian Point or Point de Venise.<sup>42</sup> The art spread from Italy to Spain, and Barcelona became the chief Spanish lace center. Although Spain produced beautiful works of lace, such as the Mantilla of Point d'Espagne, which was introduced into the Spanish Americas and Caribbean, Venice remained the center of fashion for royal courts and the elite in the Middle Ages.<sup>43</sup>

Lace became a symbol of wealth henceforth, "the early simplicity of dress had given way to extravagance and luxury, and many rich people impoverished themselves by purchasing scarves, sashes . . . cushions of gold brocade embroidered with pearls . . . and trimmings of lace made with spun gold."<sup>44</sup> Extravagance led to sumptuary laws that sought to control the expenditures of the elite, but the laws had an adverse effect on the lacemaking trade and industries. Moreover, lace became, for centuries, the monopoly of rulers and the aristocracy. As early as 1299,



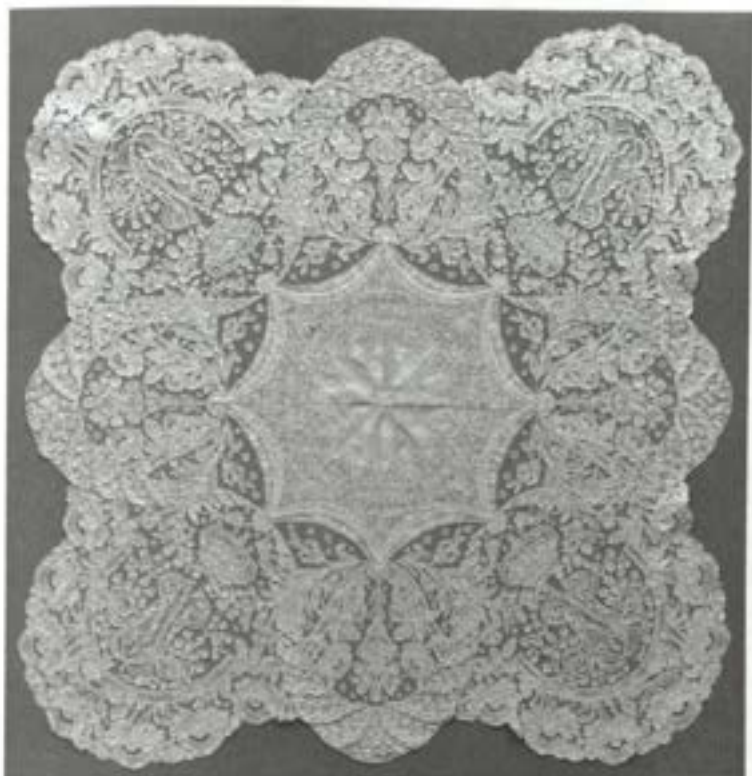


FIGURE 2.5 *Handkerchief*; Convent of Notre Dame de Visitation, Belgium, Ghent; cotton bobbin lace, circa 1865. Metropolitan Museum of Art. [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)

the Great Council of Venice forbade any trimmings which cost "more than five lire an ell."<sup>45</sup> In France, during the reign of King Louis XIV, "the lace wearing period," there were numerous ordinances against lace, and in seventeenth-century England, handmade lace was frequently used to decorate garments and would be one of the most costly elements of an outfit. Queen Elizabeth I is said to have left 3,000 dresses behind upon her death and nearly all of them ornamented with lace in a lavish manner.<sup>46</sup> The Renaissance period, which is often described as the "beginning of fashion," saw an increased interest in lace as well as greater ability for more people to afford lace.<sup>47</sup> However, by the eighteenth century, stringent laws were imposed across Europe for the protection of home-based lace industries. To the annoyance of officials, a risky trade of lace smuggling developed across borders and many people lost their lives participating in the illicit trade. Some citizens were very creative in trying to evade the laws. In 1764, several women were arrested in England for transporting baked pies containing valuable foreign laces, and in 1731, the sum of £6,000 worth of French lace was smuggled into England in the coffin of Bishop Atterbury, who had died in Paris that year.<sup>48</sup>

The French Revolution of 1789 led to more simple and less extravagant forms of dress and eventually a decline in the demand for handmade lace. Nevertheless, lacemaking skills continued to spread throughout Europe and beyond. As people migrated they carried lacemaking skills with them. Such was the case in 1568 when religious persecution drove many Flemings to England, and groups of lace makers settled down in London.<sup>49</sup> Over time, countries extended the skill to their colonies. Equally important was the role and popularity of French fashion dolls and puppets, which reached their peak of fame in the eighteenth century. These dolls were not toys, but rather models used for the displays of fashionable laces from France and Italy. The dolls were circulated throughout Europe's capitals and continued into the nineteenth century as a popular form of advertisement for ladies' dresses.<sup>50</sup>

The art of handmade lace developed rapidly and the skills circulated widely. Experts of lacemaking argue that the seventeenth century produced the finest lace. During the Renaissance period in Europe, the splendid skill, delicacy of the artistry, and design elevated lace-making to lofty heights as the embodiment of beauty, yet at the very climax of its perfection, it began to decline.<sup>51</sup> A stunning example of exquisite seventeenth century lace can be seen in Figure 2.6.

The painting depicts the Duchess of Chandos. The oil on panel portrait portrays the Duchess in her glorious finery of lace. The Duchess dons a dress with sleeves heavily laced and her standing band (flared collar) is made of reticella lace with punto in aria lace attached to reveal a delicate work of artistry.<sup>52</sup> Such bands were popular among the elite throughout the period. The Duchess's attire reflects high maintenance and English opulence. Her impractical clothing conveys a clear message to the viewer that the subject of the portrait was of high standing, enjoyed a privileged lifestyle, and had plenty of spare time to indulge in the pursuits of fashion and the lengthy process of dressing. The Duchess's elaborate band of copious folds of lavish skirting required the assistance of servants to set the band's layers and pleats with hot pokers and heavy starch once per week. The dress and band most likely required daily pinning to keep it in place.<sup>53</sup>

By the nineteenth century, most handmade lace remained very expensive and beyond the reach of all but the wealthy. During the early period of Queen Victoria's reign, patterned machine-made lace emerged on local markets, offering lace at more affordable prices for the less affluent. The public wedding of Queen Victoria in 1840 rejuvenated the lace trade and awoke interest in the art when she wore a veil of honiton lace. By the ending of the 1860s, lace was popular again and lace making, along with embroidery, crochet, and tatting, became ideal fancy work as pastime activities for English ladies.<sup>54</sup>

In earlier centuries, both men and women wore garments accessorized with lace, but as men's fashion changed and became more practical and adaptable to most work environments, women's dress became more complex and ornamental with draped fabrics and heavy skirting in need of trimmings such as lace. Gradually, lace became





FIGURE 2.6 *The Duchess of Chandos; Frances, Lady Brydges* (ca. 1553–1623), 1579, unknown artist sixteenth century. Oil on panel. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

more associated with women's fashion. This did not preclude lace as part of religious garb worn by clergy. Lace continued to charm both men and women, and perhaps its charm lies in the ability of the lace maker to imitate nature with patterns from the simplest to the most sophisticated flower of nature. Such designs exemplified the gentle touch, steady hands, much patience, excellent vision, and

countless hours of labor to bring beautiful designs to fruition that can last for many years.<sup>55</sup>

Lacemaking was predominantly women's work during the pre-industrial era. While some women, such as nuns in convents, worked on making lace for altar clothes, vestments, and the occasional social elite who had commissioned a piece of lace art, most women in the secular world of lacemaking were linked to a household industry or family economy, which functioned as a unit. As a result, many women became responsible for producing goods and reproducing future workers. Nor did women's involvement in manufacturing in the home liberate them from their customary domestic duties, even though women's relatively poor wages served to confirm unequal gender roles.<sup>56</sup> The advent of machine-made or more specifically warp knitted lace democratized the once elite accessory and at the same time transformed both the body and our perception of lace. Historically, lace was used to adorn the body and accessorize, but gradually lace acquired new images, including a symbol of sexual enticement. Warp knitted lace came within easy reach of many for use as underwear, whereas for hundreds of years intricate handmade lace had been an outer adornment that appeared in formal portraits of Duchesses (as seen earlier). Anne Hollander charges that the feminine became more disheveled, and pornographic works of art then came to depicted female nudity emerging from lacy garments.<sup>57</sup>

European women who arrived in the Caribbean and the Americas brought with them needlework and lacemaking skills and transmitted these skills to local women. In many cases enslaved women learned by watching, studying, and copying the lace making techniques of their enslavers. Lacemaking was not prevalent in Jamaica during slavery, but in other areas of the Caribbean and Latin America the art was widely practiced. For example, the curriculum for eighteenth-century elite school girls in colonial Latin America consisted of sewing, lacemaking, and spinning,<sup>58</sup> and today some convents have maintained this tradition. The Franciscan Missionary Sisters in Jamaica have continued to teach young women needlework skills.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, lacemaking was viewed as regular work for nuns in convents across many areas of Latin America.<sup>60</sup>

Other types of needlework from the colonial era can be seen in Brazil, where bobbin lace (*venda di bilros* in Portuguese) was brought to the Brazilian coastline by Portuguese colonists in the nineteenth century. Portugal had a rich tradition of lacemaking, and colonists continued to practice in the Americas. In Brazil, lacemaking was mostly the province of women; the art form was passed down from mothers to daughters who learned by watching and repeating their motions.<sup>61</sup> Enslaved African women of Bahia appropriated the lace fashions of their plantation mistresses to create ornate lace outfits for priestesses in the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé. The priestesses wore elaborate eyelet lace dresses with stiff underskirts. The popularity of lace dress in rituals reflected a large home industry of embroidery and lacemaking that developed in Brazil and is still evident today.<sup>62</sup>



In Mexico City, many Mexican women, like their counterparts in Spain, continued the tradition of wearing black lace mantillas,<sup>63</sup> and in Puerto Rico, the bobbin lace called *mundillo* was widely admired for its beauty.<sup>64</sup>

Some enslaved Africans were already familiar with European lace and dress. On the West African coast, Africans were influenced by European customs in dress, which led to a synthesis of various dress customs in several African Kingdoms. Many African rulers and dignitaries received cloth and clothing from European visitors and traders throughout the centuries of trade. In 1701, for example, Dutch officials on Gold Coast brought to the Asantehene at Kumasi a "red velvet cloth bordered with gold lace,"<sup>65</sup> and in Southern Africa, the Dutch colonists who had settled the Cape region in the seventeenth century introduced both European customs in dress and lace-making skills to indigenous people. Eventually, lace-making became a "white art" among some African women, and in more recent history, it was introduced as a major craft activity for black women in South African prisons.<sup>66</sup>

From early in Jamaica's colonial history, lace was associated with affluence and conspicuous consumption. Commenting in 1687 on the economic success of the Port Royal merchants, Reverend Francis Crow suggested it was befitting "for a cooper's wife . . . [to] go forth in the best flowered silk and richest silver and gold lace that England can afford with a couple of Negroes at her tail."<sup>67</sup> Such lavish spending on lace was not unique to Jamaica. In 1732, Justin Girod de Chantrons wrote in his journal of his voyage to Saint Domingue (Haiti) that he was concerned about the "attachment of white men to free négresses and mulattas, the devotion to pleasure, [and] the money spent on linen, lace and jewels."<sup>68</sup> In this regard, lace represented a lifestyle and signaled one's ability to consume. Europeans of financial means in the Caribbean could order lace directly from Europe for personal adornment and display to reflect their wealth and social standing. Lady Nugent, wife of the Governor of Jamaica from 1801-1805, received numerous cargos of dress from London so she could entertain in clothing appropriate to her social role and status in the colony.<sup>69</sup>

A few enslaved Africans in Jamaica did obtain European clothing trimmed with lace. Occasionally, African slaves received castoff or hand-me-down clothing as gifts from their white enslavers. Some clothing gifts most likely included garments trimmed with lace as enslavers ensured their house slaves were decently dressed as a reflection of their owner's wealth. Lady Nugent, on one occasion, "distributed to the women gowns, petticoats and various presents"<sup>70</sup> so they could attend her wedding celebration. Other enslaved individuals purchased cloth with money they saved up from selling their produce in the local markets. The visitor Cynric Williams, in 1823, observed slaves purchasing "finery" (cloth) and, "[They were] laying down pieces of money that I had never thought to see in the hands of slaves."<sup>71</sup> Some slaves may have had the opportunity to purchase European handmade lace, but this was rare as refined fabrics available for retail purchase locally were

limited and usually prohibitively expensive. The majority of enslaved Africans in Jamaica did not have access to European lace. This will change after Emancipation in 1838. Enslaved women who were literate followed the London fashions and observed images published in local papers like the *Falmouth Post* and the *Royal Gazette*.<sup>72</sup> These papers were full of advertisements with detailed descriptions of appropriate dress materials suitable for specific occasions. Seamstresses and washer women who worked in the plantation Great House had access to their owners' garments and could study them, and become familiar with lace.<sup>73</sup>

Several intriguing images from the Caribbean portray colonial subjects' familiarity with European lace and its use as a status symbol. In Agostino Brunia's paintings from the Eastern Caribbean, much attention is paid to dress, therefore emphasizing the importance of cloth and dress in the colonial society. Since cloth was imported, it was highly valued, both as a commodity as well as a medium of exchange. Cloth and dress were also signifiers that expressed social meanings in addition to their functional roles. In this instance, his painting is colorful, and the art work depicts interesting subjects, but what is most relevant is the use of lace in the subjects' clothes. In the painting *A West Indian Flower Girl* (Figure 2.7), the mulatto women can be seen wearing the most ornate headdresses imaginable. The dress and elaborate headwraps of the mulattos set them apart from the rest of the society and signals their elite standing. For enslaved women, especially mulatto women, acquiring the most expensive and extravagant dress was one way of achieving differentiation and social mobility. The rarity and uniqueness of the outfit usually commanded social admiration within the community.<sup>74</sup>

The women in the painting are dressed in brightly colored long skirts and shawls called fichus as typical of European women's fashion at the time. The two subjects facing the viewer are wearing blouses with lace sleeves that was fashionable among the elite of the period, and symbolic of gentility and refinement,<sup>75</sup> meanwhile the central figure accessorized her outfit with a high cap, ornamented with black and white lace. The headgear and dress is reminiscent of the lace caps and lace fichus of the Normandy peasant women in France who prided themselves on the fineness of their lappets (decorative folds attached to headdress), and elaborate lace caps, and lace-trimmed halo headgear; these exquisite headdresses in France identified the peasants' village.<sup>76</sup> The headdress of the other women in the painting are reminiscent of the African woman's headwrap and their dress reflect a Creole aesthetic. The Creole dress was subversive by nature and fundamentally radical because it defied easy categorization due to its blending of African and European styles in dress. In essence, it visually and symbolically challenged the colonial regimes' apparent deep-seated desire to divide the colonial world into clear-cut opposites of black and white, African and European.<sup>77</sup>

The most prominent feature of dress depicted in the painting is the headwraps although one subject imitates the European high style of some years before, wearing a straw hat on top of a headwrap. The women's headdress captivates the viewer due



FIGURE 2.7 *A West Indian Flower Girl and Two other Free Women of Color*. Agostino Brunias (1728–1796). Oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

to the height, vibrant colors, and texture of the wraps. An interesting synthesis in dress customs, such a headdress could have been a popular trend or a fashion statement among some enslaved women, perhaps a symbol of the wearer's wealth, status, and prestige.<sup>79</sup> Agostino Brunias' subjects are portrayed as "exotic others" with an air of elegance, beauty, and sophistication. Perhaps he has exaggerated or embellished his subjects' dress; this we will never know.<sup>79</sup> Nonetheless, his subjects



are positioned in a space that could be identical to any urban center in Europe of the time. The reality of a harsh environment based on plantation slavery and brutal punishments is absent, and instead the viewer is deceived by the world of bright colors and the beauty of "exoticized" mulatto women in high fashion, idly indulging in a tranquil moment of buying tropical flowers.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, *Sketches in Character*, by the Jewish Jamaican artist, Isaac Mendes Belisario (1795–1849), provides visual evidence of Jamaican slaves dressed in magnificent carnival costumes, ornamented with lace and bedecked in sumptuous finery<sup>81</sup> (Figures 2.8 and 2.9). Colonial authorities allowed enslaved Africans and their descendants in Jamaica to hold carnivals and Crop-Over celebrations on Christmas holidays. Slave carnivals contained subtexts of subtle resistance not obvious to whites, which enabled slaves to make merry and simultaneously poke fun at the institution that denied them their rights as human beings.<sup>82</sup> Such revelry reflected a blending of African and European masquerade combined with mimicry, British mumming plays, and Shakespearean monologues. Carnival was also a performative space, in which slaves appropriated the symbols of their enslavers and experienced some fleeting or temporary power. Carnival was the



FIGURE 2.8 Queen or Maam of the set girls. *Sketches of Character: in illustration of the habits, occupation, and costume of the Negro population, in the island of Jamaica*; Isaac Mendes Belisario (1795–1849). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



FIGURE 2.9 Koo, Koo, or Actor-Boy. *Sketches of Character: in illustration of the habits, occupation, and costume of the Negro population, in the island of Jamaica*; Isaac Mendes Belisario (1795–1849). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

embodiment of creolization and cultural adaptation in action.<sup>83</sup> Often, the celebration included masquerades called Jonkonnu, consisting of masked troupes, dancers, and a procession of women called Set Girls led by a queen or Maam for the occasion.<sup>84</sup>

In the procession, the queen or Maam was more elaborately dressed to reflect her status in the parade as compared with other women in the procession. In Figure 2.8, the queen or the Maam is dressed in a spectacular costume, decorated with rosebuds and designed with puffed sleeves and a low neckline. Her outfit is accessorized with a broad brim hat and large plumage, and she carries a decorated whip. One of the most striking features of her dress is the falling band of lace frills accentuating the queen's low-cut neckline.

Equally intriguing, the image of Koo, Koo, or Actor Boy (Figure 2.9) provides visual confirmation of slaves' use of lace. The masked participant is dressed in a magnificent costume with heavy plumage above a well-coiffed wig. He wears a skirt with flounces extending all around to create several layers with edgings of

lace. These elaborate costumes were funded by white sponsors and enslavers who enabled their slaves to go all out with their fancy outfits, consequently heightening the rivalry in dress among enslaved individuals. Some sponsors sought to outdo each other. Nonetheless, lace remained a popular accessory in carnival costumes during slavery and into the present.<sup>65</sup>

## The Jamaican bark-cloth industry

*"When chubble tek yu, pikney shut fit yu"—When you find yourself in trouble, a child's shirt fits you.<sup>66</sup>*

### JAMAICAN PROVERB

There were several factors that led to the development of a bark-cloth industry in Jamaica. Many enslaved Africans received insufficient clothing from their enslavers and were expected to supplement their yearly rations. Most slaves received "as much Oznaburgh as will make two frocks, and as much woolen stuff as will make a great coat."<sup>67</sup> Clearly, this was not enough for most slaves since the intense labor in the fields, along with the weathering of garments, often rotted the meager clothing rations slaves received.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, "[h]ead negroes [usually men] on estates generally received some present in the way of clothing upon the conclusion of crop."<sup>69</sup> Of critical note, slave laws regarding dress did not require equal distribution of clothing between enslaved men and women. In 1793 on the Worthy Park Estate, skilled male slaves received ten yards of osnaburg and three yards of Baize. A few skilled enslaved women received the same amount of osnaburg, but no Baize. On Harmony Hall Estate, a similar pattern of distribution existed. Slave men received more clothing than slave women, regardless of the fact that women's clothing of the period required more cloth for skirting. Likewise, in 1811, male head slaves received twelve yards of osnaburg and six yards of blue Baize each, while each regular male slave received eight yards of osnaburg. Female slaves, on the other hand, received seven yards each, and children five yards.<sup>70</sup> Generally, enslaved women received smaller clothing rations, and therefore had a greater need than slave men for sufficient dress. The custom of rewarding male slaves for their skills with more clothing, even though enslaved women worked side by side with enslaved men in the fields, reflected the colonial misogynistic perspective that women's contribution to the colonial economy was not valued as much as that of men. Deprived of validation, the dismissal of women's labor reaffirmed the patriarchal norms of colonial society and at the same time reinforced African women's subordination to African men.

Enslaved Africans had to find alternative means of supplementing their clothing rations. A few women stole clothes from their enslavers. White mistresses



complained regularly that their washerwomen had a tendency to "lose" clothing;<sup>95</sup> others received additional dress in exchange for sexual favors. The slave mistress Phibbah received gifts of clothing from her enslaver, Thistlewood, including "six pairs of shoes and much cloth for herself."<sup>96</sup> Several slaves purchased extra garments and cloth with money saved up from selling their produce. In 1833, "[a] slave in the parish of Clarendon admitted that he made by this means, forty pounds annually."<sup>97</sup> Seamstresses were also able to earn money by offering their services to prospective customers. In 1786, Phibbah gave Thistlewood a present in silver, money she had earned by "sewing, baking cassava, selling musk melons and watermelons out of her ground."<sup>98</sup> In some instances, women received clothing on special occasions and as a reward for bearing children.<sup>99</sup> The planter Matthew Gregory Lewis gave "each [slave] mother a present of a scarlet girdle with a silver medal in the centre ... [which] entitled her to marks of peculiar respect ... and receiving a larger portion [of dress] than the rest."<sup>100</sup> During the commemoration of a new hospital on Lewis' estate, every woman received "a flaming red stuff petticoat."<sup>101</sup> Enslaved women who received extra clothes and European dress were socially elevated within the slave society but for planters like Lewis the slave woman's body was the focus of economic interest and sexual exploitation. Historian Hilary Beckles asserts that the enslaved woman's sexuality and maternity were no longer her own, but were placed on the market as capital assets to be manipulated for the benefit of plantocrats.<sup>102</sup>

Some slaves and freed people could not afford the cost of imported textiles and looked for a less costly and more viable means of obtaining dress. Enslaved Africans from bark-cloth and textile producing areas of Africa utilized the skills they acquired locally and in Africa to obtain suitable raw materials for dress from their environment. They acquired some knowledge of native plants from the Tainos, and built on this knowledge and developed it further.<sup>103</sup> They looked for plants in the Jamaican forests that could be used to make dyes to color the drab fabrics they received from their enslavers. Several dye pigments were used, such as indigo-berry (*Randia aculeate*), annatto or roucou tree (*Bixa orellana*), and vine sorrel (*Cissus trifoliata*).<sup>104</sup> The extensive list of dye sources (see Appendix) recorded by early natural historians and residents suggest the development of an auxiliary industry in dye production. As in West Africa, the Jamaican dye industry engaged in a vibrant and fluid relationship with lace-bark and bark-cloth producers, seamstresses, and cloth traders within the slave economy. Several smaller auxiliary cottage industries associated with plants developed, including soap, perfume, and tanning for leather. Enslavers did not provide the basic necessities for personal hygiene. These industries developed out of a need and a desire on the part of slaves to be healthy, to look good and feel good. Contrary to racist beliefs of the time, slaves were concerned about their appearance and personal hygiene in spite of living in a harsh environment. The bark-cloth industry thrived, as the amount of cotton

grown in Jamaica during this period was not enough to have an impact on the local economy, and mass scale cotton production was not encouraged as some feared it would compete with Britain's textiles industry.<sup>101</sup> Bark-cloth seemed an ideal alternative.

The Jamaican bark industry was extensive and important to the livelihood of many slaves and freed people. The industry included the services of herbalists and healers, tree spotters, loggers, bark cutters, artisans, dyers, seamstresses, and tailors, to traders, tanners, and perfumers. Those involved received some financial rewards for their participation. The earliest historical evidence of bark-cloth in Jamaica dates to the seventeenth century when Charles II, king of England from 1660 to 1685, was presented with a lace-bark cravat by the Governor of Jamaica, Sir Thomas Lynch, who governed the island twice from 1671 to 1674 and again in 1682 to 1684.<sup>102</sup> Sloane mentioned this event and provided the earliest description of lace-bark in Jamaica. Undoubtedly, the governor's presentation brought Jamaica some prestige and awareness of Africans' creativity and superb craft skills.

As indicated, bark-cloth production existed earlier among the indigenous Tainos, while a few Spaniards who had settled the region prior to the British were already familiar with lace-bark and bark-cloth.<sup>103</sup> Within a few decades after the British arrived, the bark-cloth industry in Jamaica had developed to the level worthy of royal recognition. Chief among the participants in the bark-cloth industry were the Maroons, many of whom were of West African heritage, who had successfully escaped the plantations and secured their freedom in the mountains. They had greater flexibility and more time to engage in the cottage industry compared with many slaves who labored under harsh conditions for long hours in the fields. Furthermore, the Leeward Maroons controlled vast areas of the Cockpit Country with trees suitable for bark-cloth and lace-bark production.<sup>104</sup>

Several enslaved and freed Africans obtained bast fibers from plants for use in clothing manufacture, including mountain cabbage [*Euterpe oleracea*] and the down-tree-down [*Ochroma pyramidale*].<sup>105</sup> Reminiscent of raffia cloth production in Central Africa, these barks were stripped, beaten soft, and the fibers pulled out, separated, carded or combed to untangle, and dried. The dried fibers were then woven into textile, sewed or tied, and worn. Banana leaf fibers (abaca) obtained from the banana tree were treated in the same manner. The bark from other trees used to make clothing included the trumpet tree [*Cecropia peltata*]. In this case, the bark was cut away in narrow strips, peeled down to the inner thin layer. Similar to aspects of bark-cloth production in Polynesia and Africa, the thin strips were removed, beaten, dried, and then sewn together.<sup>106</sup>

Unlike the production process in Polynesia and Africa, there were no carved mallets for beating in the Jamaican context. We can only speculate that artisans improvised with heavy pieces of wood or suitable stones with smooth surfaces for



beating the bark. The exact weaving technique is unclear since this is no longer done and the knowledge has been lost over the decades. Nor do we know if some weaving was done on specific looms. In the absence of archeological evidence of working looms, we can surmise it was done primarily by hand twisting and plaiting of fibers, perhaps similar to weaving baskets or fine mats, which is still done in rural Jamaica and particularly among the Maroons. Ingeniously, enslaved Africans learned to "make fashion" with what was available and accessible to them. The most popular form of bark-cloth was obtained from the *Lagetta lagetto* or lace-bark tree.<sup>107</sup>

## Lace-bark: the tree of life

*Let us praise now market women: higglers,  
who maintain our solid, hidden economy  
in soft money banks between full breasts.  
Gold next; now these women control silver.*<sup>108</sup>

LORNA GOODISON, JAMAICAN POET, "CONTROLLING  
THE SILVER"

Just as the paper mulberry, *Ficus*, and *kyenkyen* trees were valued for their properties, the lace-bark tree was valued in Jamaica, Cuba, and Haiti for the many properties derived from its bark for use in industry, agriculture, and the home. Lace-bark was used as functional decorative art, medicine, and clothing. Strips of fiber from the thick inner bark were twisted into ropes for industrial uses, making hammocks, and restraining farm animals. Thin pieces of inner woody bark were woven into "hampa" baskets for storage and to carry produce to market. The lace-bark tree provided wood for fencing, and small slender branches that were sturdy and ideal as support sticks for yam vines in slaves' produce gardens and on large farms. Additionally, in Cuba, Jamaica, and Haiti, the bark of the lace-bark tree was sought after by both colonialists and slaves for its medicinal properties. It was used to cure "chronic rheumatism and pain in the bones from lues or the yaws."<sup>109</sup> Field slaves used the macerated bark with water to heal skin eruptions, rashes, and other skin problems, as well as sun stroke from laboring long hours in the hot climate.<sup>110</sup> Some enslaved women used the green bark (from young plants) as an abortifacient.<sup>111</sup> There is much evidence of indigenous people using plants to commit infanticide to resist slavery and colonial oppression. There is no evidence to suggest that African women learned about lace-bark for this purpose from the Taínos. Regardless, some enslaved women engaged in "gynecological resistance" to express their anger at slavery and their refusal to allow their unborn children to endure such oppression.<sup>112</sup>





FIGURE 2.10 Lace-bark whips made from branches of the lace-bark tree. The inner woody portion and outer bark have been partially removed and the remaining inner bark twisted into the whip tails.

Lace-bark was fashioned into instruments of brutalization. As depicted in countless narratives and seen in numerous films, perhaps, no other emblem was as ubiquitous and emotionally charged as the planter's whip. Enslavers utilized the bark to make whips to flog their slaves as punishment (Figure 2.10).

A branch of lace-bark was cut, with a portion of the outer wood being removed, and the bark twisted into a lash called a "Negro-whip." Throughout slavery, whips were commonly made from the tree.<sup>113</sup> Punishment occurred daily on plantations and within urban spaces. Sloane wrote that for "negligence slaves were usually whipped by the overseers."<sup>114</sup> Under the enslavers' whip, neither age nor sex made any difference. Female house slaves were more vulnerable than field slaves as they were in closer proximity to the enslaver, and therefore the frequent victims of sadistic whims. Occasionally, the slave woman might be the target of the

mistress's jealous rage.<sup>115</sup> Pregnant slaves were not shielded from the whip either, and were unnecessarily flogged, which jeopardized both the life of the mother and unborn child.<sup>116</sup> Ironically, the same bark used to thrash the slave was also used to heal the tortured black body. In addition, lace-bark whips used in pens to "drive" cattle and horses were called "horse whips." In spite of this, the bark's most common use was in the production of household items and clothing manufacture.

Among the Leeward Maroons, labor was divided by gender in the lace-bark industry. Maroon men were responsible for harvesting the bark, making ropes, and hammocks. Women, on the other hand, dominated the processing of lace-bark for clothing and household use.<sup>117</sup> Unlike bark-cloth production among the Ashanti in West Africa, lace-bark production in Jamaica was gendered female. It is not clear when or how lace-bark became gendered female considering the strong West African cultural characteristics amongst the Maroons and many enslaved Africans in Jamaica. One possible explanation for the switch in gender roles has to do with the Maroon leader, Cudjoe. In the early eighteenth century, Cudjoe became chief of the Leeward Maroons and charged the men with warfare and hunting, and he directed the women in "planting provisions and managing domestic affairs."<sup>118</sup> Possibly the women embraced lace-bark as part of their domestic duty to provide clothing for themselves and their families; however, the evidence is inconclusive.

In contrast to other bark-cloths examined in this study, lace-bark production was very different. The men canvased sections of the rain forest in search of mature lace-bark trees for harvesting. Depending on the amount of lace desired, branches were removed for processing or narrow strips of bark were cut longitudinally from the bole of the tree. More often, wide sections of bark were removed all at once, thus preventing the tree bark from regenerating and eventually killing the tree. Most detrimental was the felling of trees for their entire bark. Once harvested, the inner bark was separated from the corky outer bark. The inner bark had a fine texture, almost elastic, very strong, and consisted of several layers of reticuled fibers. The open spaces within the net-like structure of the fibers was rhombus in shape. The layers could be divided into a number of thin filaments, which, after being soaked in water, could be drawn out or teased out with fingers, thus spreading the lacy fibers five times wider than the original width of the bark strip. The web-like filaments or fiber was rolled into large "puff balls" then left to be dried on the ground (Figures 2.11, 2.12, 2.13).

Edward Long explained that the rolled fiber was then stretched again and, "in order to bleach it, after being drawn out as much as it will bear, they expose it stretched to the sunshine, and sprinkle it frequently with water. . . . It bears washing extremely well . . . with common soap . . . and is equal to the best artificial lace."<sup>119</sup> Dried bark required some effort to remove the fibers due to less moisture. The bark could be boiled or soaked for easy separation. Freshly harvested bark could be separated by hand. Soaking or boiling did not harm the fibers. However, typical of



FIGURE 2.11 Drying the lace-bark puffs. Photo by Ashley E. Smith from the book *Souvenir of Jamaica* circa 1903. Author's private collection.



FIGURE 2.12 Working out the lace-bark. Photo by Ashley E. Smith from the book *Souvenir of Jamaica* circa 1903. Author's private collection.





FIGURE 2.13 A piece of prepared lace-bark, Jamaica. Courtesy of the University of the West Indies Library, Mona.

some vegetable fibers like flax, which is used for linen and has a natural wax that adds stiffness and sheen, the cell makeup of the lace-bark produced a naturally occurring, protective stiffener that could be rinsed out to achieve the desirable softness of lace.<sup>120</sup> The end product resembled fine lace, but could also imitate linen and gauze.

Long observed, "The ladies [slaves and freed women] of the island are extremely dexterous in making caps, ruffles, and complete suits of lace with it ... the wild Negroes [Maroons] have made apparel with it of a very durable nature."<sup>121</sup> Several sources corroborate Long's statements. John Lunan, for instance, in 1814 acknowledged the popularity of lace-bark dress among Jamaican women and the role of the Maroons in the industry. Lunan added, "There is no doubt but very fine clothes might be made with it."<sup>122</sup> These early accounts provide tantalizing clues of clothing made from lace-bark. Long does not provide detailed description of the actual dress styles; however, references to ruffles and suits of lace suggest some European influences in design. The lace was versatile, soft, and malleable to be stitched into diverse styles, including suits of lace, to ruffles, and lace caps. One of the most curious surviving clothing artifacts is a child's night dress and cap from Jamaica (Figures 2.14, 2.15). The dress was



FIGURE 2.14 Lace-bark dress, donated in 1833 by Marchioness Cornwallis. Photograph: © Saffron Walden Museum, Essex.

fashioned into the "empire style" of the 1820s in lace-bark, reflecting a closely fitted torso, high-waist bodice, short sleeves, and a scooped neckline.<sup>123</sup> The dress and cap belonged to the Marchioness Cornwallis, wife of Lord Braybrooke of Audley End, whose father-in-law resided in Jamaica.<sup>124</sup> The simplicity in the dress design reflects a certain degree of elegance and suggests that styles reciprocated between classes as some Europeans found Jamaican lace-bark appealing.<sup>125</sup>

Other types of clothing and accessories made from lace-bark included bonnets, fans, and slippers overlaid with lace-bark (Figure 2.16). Natural lace was used to make fashionable "dress up" clothes for special occasions and, like the Haya people in East Africa where bark-cloth was associated with mortuary rites, both men and



FIGURE 2.15 Lace-bark cap from Jamaica, donated in 1833 by Marchioness Cornwallis. Photograph: © Saffron Walden Museum, Essex.

women in late seventeenth-century Jamaica used the lagetto linen for mourning dress.<sup>126</sup>

Early accounts suggest there was a change in fashion trends over time amongst the subjugated population. In the seventeenth century, Hans Sloane mentioned that lace-bark was used by both men and women in clothing especially for mourning. By the eighteenth century, this seems to have shifted and lace-bark became primarily women's wear. Natural lace was used to make shawls and veils. In 1823, the visitor Cynric Williams recalled he met a girl on the road wearing "a veil over her face, which I [he] thought at first to be lace, but found to be made of the bark of a tree; it is drawn out by the hand while the bark is green, and has a very pretty effect."<sup>127</sup> Maybe the veil was worn to conceal her identity or provide shade from the hot sun while traveling. It could have been used as an expedient article of clothing to cover facial scarring and disfigurement. The veil might have been an





FIGURE 2.16 Slippers of lace-bark with soles made of coconut bark india rubber fiber (1827). Photograph: © Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

appropriation of the fashionable Spanish *mantilla* brought to Jamaica by immigrants and visitors from the Spanish colonies. Natural lace was a great substitute when European lace was scarce or too expensive, and it was used for every clothing purpose that manufactured and European handmade lace was used.<sup>128</sup>

Among other functions, lace-bark was used in the home to make doilies or "fern mats" and runners to decorate tables and home furniture (Figure 2.17), and it was used as a sieve during cooking. Lace-bark was ideal for bandages to treat wounds, and as window curtains and space dividers in the home. Veils made from lace-bark were used as protective coverings for the cradle of newborns to shield them from gnats or mosquitos from biting the child lying under it.<sup>129</sup> The multitude of lace-bark uses provides some semblance of a cottage industry in clothing manufacture,<sup>130</sup> and a level of personal freedom and creative impulse among enslaved people.

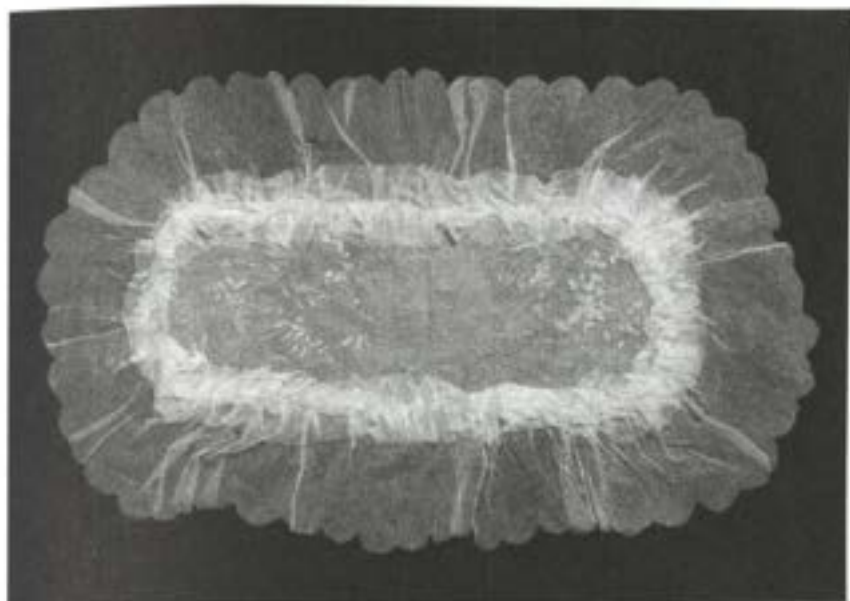


FIGURE 2.17 Placemat made of lace-bark. Photograph: © Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

## Situation in Haiti, Cuba, and the question of women's labor

*"Árbol que nace torcido, jamás su tronco endereza."*—A tree that is born bent cannot be made straight.<sup>131</sup>

### CUBAN PROVERB

The situation in Haiti and Cuba was somewhat different from that in Jamaica. The *lagetto* tree was very rare in Haiti and did not have as wide a distribution and abundance as in Jamaica. Consequently, Haitian lace-bark never attained the same level of fame. In Haiti, the lace-bark tree or *bwa dantèl*<sup>132</sup> was found in Jacmel and on the Island of la Gonâve, off the coast of Western Haiti.<sup>133</sup> In rural areas, the bark was used to make ropes for farm use, and whips to punish disobedient children.<sup>134</sup> *Bwa dantèl* was among a variety of fibrous plants suitable for making paper and textiles; however, several species of the genus *Daphnopsis* were more popular. Likewise, *bwa chandèl* [*Pinus occidentalis*] was widely utilized for its fibers. Bast-fibers were woven into cloth for secular and ritual dress, including brightly colored sequined costumes for African influenced celebrations

such as Rara.<sup>135</sup> Interestingly, lace-bark was used in Vodou for customary medicine and as spiritual food for loa (spirits) on special occasions and during certain rites. Among some Vodou practitioners, lace-bark was known as *laget* or *ma laget*.<sup>136</sup> Meanwhile, in the Dominican Republic, the lace-bark tree was rare and was not used in clothing manufacture due to the abundance and widespread use of cotton.<sup>137</sup>

The Spaniards in Cuba were long aware of lace-bark and in the late "sixteenth century, sent to the king in Old Spain a splendid collar of lace made of this tree-bark."<sup>138</sup> Several species of the *Lagetta* genus are endemic to Cuba, yet lace-bark or *Daguilla*<sup>139</sup> did not have a wide distribution as in Jamaica. In Cuba, the tree was found on the *Loma Daguilla* (Lace-bark Hill) an isolated mountain south-west of the San Juan hills, and Isle de Pinos, where it grew high up on cliffs and terraced mountain sides, thus was difficult to access.<sup>140</sup> *Daguilla*, also called *Guana*, was utilized by Spaniards and Afro-Cubans alike. Spanish farmers used it to make ropes, and in the eighteenth century, *daguilla* fibers were sent to the Queen in Spain and other principal ladies at court.<sup>141</sup> Rural farmers meantime used lace-bark scarves to woo young ladies.<sup>142</sup> Lace-bark was used to make aprons, kerchiefs, and overalls for covering while working in the fields and cooking.<sup>143</sup> The principal use of the lace-bark in Cuba was for making ropes. Botanist Baron H. Eggers reported from Cuba in 1889, "Some very interesting bast was obtained from three different trees, the finest of a lace-bark tree, called *Guana* [*Lagetta linteria*] ... the common Cuban bast very much used for ropes."<sup>144</sup> Cuba was actively engaged in ship building; therefore ropes would be needed for the industry. As in Haiti, lace-bark was used in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería. *Daguilla* was associated with the god Osun.<sup>145</sup> However, there is no evidence to suggest that lace-bark was used in Afro-Jamaican religions.

Lace-bark was appealing to many colonized people in Jamaica for its beauty, versatility, and resemblance to handmade lace. Most interesting, it was strong and durable. It was washable with regular soap, and the fibers could be dyed. Some women wore natural lace as a means of elevating themselves within the colonial society. For centuries, lace represented the social mores and attitude of the wearer in that "the apparent fragility of its delicate design suggested the refinement and gentility of its wearer."<sup>146</sup> However, enslaved people were denigrated and considered by colonists as incapable of refinement. Throughout slavery, comparisons between African women and animals were not infrequent.<sup>147</sup> Sir Hans Sloane compared the breasts of African women who had borne children to the udders of goats, and Edward Long suggested that African women had a natural affinity to the orangutan.<sup>148</sup> Such racist analogies not only allowed for the economic and sexual exploitation of enslaved women, but sought to humiliate and defeminize black women. For enslaved women, who could afford it, lace-bark clothing was a means of reclaiming and asserting their femininity and simultaneously rejecting the stereotypes associated with black women. Some women were lured by the delicate beauty of lace-bark. Like linen, the lightness and airiness of the fabric was attractive



as it kept the body cool in the tropical heat. A few may have viewed lace-bark as an opportunity to own something unique and valuable, to reminisce of bark-cloth production in Africa, and at the same time establish a cultural link to their ancestral homelands.

Women as producers and distributors of lace-bark were rewarded with some financial independence for their art and creative energies by producing exquisite lace materials for colonized consumers. Lace-bark was less strenuous to produce, unlike tapa in Polynesia and bark-cloth in Africa; it did not require special tools, and long hours of continuous, noisy pounding of bark with heavy mallets. Lace-bark could be processed in the quiet of the home after a long day in the fields, in gendered spaces that enabled women to strengthen solidarities. Some colonized women most likely found lace-bark production relaxing while others with industrious fingers were attracted to the entrepreneurial opportunities lace-bark production and sale provided. Enslaved persons, particularly women, were in fact interested in increasing their share of the colonial wealth by engaging in the market economy as "commodity producers and distributors."<sup>149</sup> Eco-botanists Brennan, Harris, and Nesbitt raise the important question about market distribution of lace-bark and reveal that since the area was largely inaccessible to outsiders and the trees grew within Maroon territory, it is likely that "Maroon collectors of bark traded it to the rest of the island."<sup>150</sup> This seems logical and, as we will see, the Maroons of Accompong Town and surrounding areas continued to supply lace-bark into the twentieth century. Although lace-bark was traded across Jamaica and the "ladies were dexterous" in making lace-bark dress, it should not be assumed that lace-bark was inexpensive and within everyone's reach. On the contrary, lace-bark was not affordable to everyone; in fact it was "valuable when manufactured into articles of dress."<sup>151</sup>

In a series of interviews, Maroon women recalled their mothers and grandmothers actively processing lace-bark for personal adornment and for trade in local markets. Women dominated the lace-bark industry in Jamaica. The women argued that "lace-bark" was "women's business" and jokingly uttered that "no man dared" to "double-cross" a trader—if not, all the women would "beat him."<sup>152</sup> On another occasion, one of the women remarked, "Women are head of the household; we only let the men think they are in charge!"<sup>153</sup> The ebullience of the women conveyed a sense of solidarity and self-reliance, as well as their ability to supervise their skills. Although women dominated the trade and manufacture of lace-bark, men played a key but peripheral and complementary role to the women as the harvesters of the bark. Individual families were engaged in lace-bark while some women organized themselves around lace-bark production. The men were hired and paid by the women to locate and cut the bark in the forest. Sometimes the women accompanied the men to make sure the men were cutting the bark correctly or to "keep an eye" on the men who might sell to the competition. There are stories of African women, not happy with the services of the men, dismissing the men and cutting the trees themselves.<sup>154</sup> This history raises important questions about male

dominance and gender relations within the colonial context. Moreover, lace-bark was often a collective process that involved the skills of several women in the household or from the community working in groups to produce lace-bark for sale in the local markets.<sup>155</sup>

Scholars, such as Claire Robertson, in her analysis of West African women's role as traders and the importance of women's collective bargaining, organizing, and solidarity, have helped shape our understanding of African women's lives and their economic activities and contributions to their households and communities at large.<sup>156</sup> African women brought their trading skills to the Caribbean and put these skills to work in the lace-bark industry and other sectors of the slave economy. Jamaican sources from the period do not mention men's participation in bark clothing production, which suggests that women not only made the lace products but they traded and controlled this sector. This enabled women to provide clothing for themselves, their families, and members of the slave community. Perhaps Jamaican women, slave and freed, found lacemaking more profitable and worthwhile than textile weaving and, therefore, concentrated their efforts in this industry when they could. Slave men who had sufficient clothing saw no need to participate in this type of creative process. Others, perhaps, chose not to be involved because of the stigma associated with bark-cloth. In some West African societies, such as the Asante, bark-cloth over time became the dress of the lower classes and was made and worn by the poorest slaves.<sup>157</sup>

In post-Emancipation Jamaica, lace-bark production declined. As readymade European clothing became more accessible and affordable, the demand for bark clothing waned. Lace-bark was not seen as a viable commercial item and was never embraced by the retail sector that emphasized European imports. Gradually lace-bark became a tourist item of curiosity, an exotic souvenir for the emerging tourist market but, as we will see, there will be challenges for the lace-bark tree. Some freed women perhaps chose not to wear lace-bark because it was associated with slavery, while others were lured and seduced by the numerous refined fabrics once denied them and the ease with which these items could now be purchased. Others embraced European imported fabrics as a means of elevating their position in the new social order.

As slaves, African women's bodies were controlled by their enslavers and, as freed women, they were subjects of the colonial state. Yet, African women were not completely powerless. Women's solidarity and their gendered shaped experiences provided the necessary strength to survive in the colonial economy while women's collective bargaining skills enabled African women to combat male dominance and simultaneously secure their business interests as lace-bark traders. African women's role in the Jamaican lace-bark industry was a great example of grassroots commerce in a unique commodity that provided some wealth and financial independence for women. Hence, women were empowered by their ability to "control their silver" and contribute to their households.

Despite this, African women's desire to create a new world for themselves through entrepreneurial activities such as lace-bark production came under threat. Women's contribution to the colonial economy was dismissed and the imposition of colonial capitalism sought to control women whose labor was essential to the survival of their families. In Jamaica, for example, some colonial settlers called on the government to "take control in the service of Great Britain as a manufacturing Nation," and in 1885 a government committee was established to test the capabilities of certain machines to produce plant fibers on a commercial scale.<sup>150</sup> This action suppressed women's participation in lace-bark, and the colonial state offered no support; women's dominance in lace-bark was seen as a barrier to government plans to diversify the colonial economy that had relied heavily on sugar. The focus was now the development of a cotton and textile industry.